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ABSTRACT

The failure of many beginning reading students to become efficient or enthusiastic readers is due to mistaken views of the reading process that cause teachers to stress isolated reading skills and error-free oral reading, rather than focusing on children's ability to read with understanding. Teachers who want to teach differently must take an objective look at reading practices, create settings in which children are willing to take risks, view errors as clues to children's logic, and examine the process of language acquisition for clues that might be applied in reading instruction. Language acquiring children are language receivers long before they are language expressers; they are immersed in the whole of language; and they receive reinforcement for partial success in language production. Similarly, teachers of beginning reading can permit reception to precede expression and can immerse students in the whole of written language through such approaches as the oral cloze procedure and having students follow written material read aloud by the teacher. They can then begin to encourage student help with the reading and to use selective cloze procedures that develop students' predictive abilities. As students begin to read, teachers should respond to miscues by rewarding word approximations, placing first emphasis on what makes sense. Using this approach, teachers can prevent the proliferation of problem readers. (GT)

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PREVENTING THE PROLIFERATION OF PROBLEM READERS

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There are many students in our classrooms who will not become efficient or enthusiastic readers under present methods of instruction. The failure of these students to become competent and comfortable readers is not the result of any deficit in the abilities of the students; average and above average students are included in this group who do not attain the quality of reading achievement which they are capable of attaining. The failure of these students to become competent and comfortable readers is not the result of any deficit in the dedication or enthusiasm of their teachers; many of the teachers of these students are conscientiously following the directions in their teacher's guides, or the example that was set by their supervising teacher, or the information they obtained in college methods classes, or the activities and instructions set forth in commercial materials. There are many good ideas to be garnered from these sources. However, these sources can also lead to scenes such as the following:

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Scene I: A teacher was listening to a student reading. The teacher's task, as set forth by the program she was using, was to make a tally mark for each incorrect response made by the student. The text read: "He put on his pajamas and went to bed." The student said: "He put on his p.j.'s and went to bed." On hearing this response, the teacher stated, "It's not p.j.'s, it's pajamas." The teacher then made a tally mark for an incorrect response.

Scene II: The reading supervisor was discussing a student's progress with the teacher. The reading supervisor said, "Yes, this child reads well, but does not know the sounds of the vowels and vowel digraphs, or how to blend words."

Scene III: The teacher had been discussing with the principal a child who was having difficulty learning the vowel sounds. So the principal provided funds for the teacher to purchase a large collection of workbook pages from another publisher.

These scenes illustrate a view of the reading process which limits the extent to which students will learn to read well, and the student who does not read well does not enjoy reading. The student who does not enjoy reading does not read voluntarily. The student who does not read voluntarily does not learn to read well, because you learn to read by reading.

Something different in the teaching of reading needs to occur. However, in order to teach differently, the teacher must view the reading process differently. In order to view the reading process differently, the teacher must be informed, imaginative, and insightful. This is the teacher who is determined to look beyond what is to what might be. This is the teacher who continues to look at historical practices to decide which are developmentally sound and which need to be discarded, and who incorporates new insights about language learning into the instructional program. This is the teacher who is not afraid to take an objective view of self.

The teacher who resolves to view the reading process differently believes that children want to learn, and that they possess an internal dynamic for growth. This teacher believes that if we set the stage in such a way as to capitalize on this internal dynamic, we cannot keep the children from growing as readers. This teacher believes in a policy of encouragement rather than discouragement, thus creating a setting in which the child is willing to become a risk-taker.

This teacher will develop a particular frame of reference toward errors, looking upon them not as indicators of a child's lack of intelligence, but as clues to the logic the child is using. With this attitude on the teacher's part, the student will feel more relaxed and secure with the written language.

This teacher, convinced that the process of learning to read can be made easier for many students that will be or have become problem readers, will form a creative synthesis of information from child development and language learning, firm in the conviction that it is possible to set up a reading environment in which success is more readily attained.

The teacher who is determined to institute a reading program that will capitalize on the child's internal dynamic will, among other avenues of investigation and experimentation, study the ways in which the child acquires the spoken language, looking for clues that might be applied in helping students gain control of the written language.

As we look at the language acquiring child, we note first that the child is a language receiver. The child has daily opportunities to hear the language, long before being expected to be a language expresser. The child listens to the language first, and in due time will become a producer of language. Next we note that this receiver of language is immersed in the whole of language. The child does not hear bits and pieces of language. Mother does not talk only in short vowels; daddy does not utter only final digraphs; grandmother utilizes more than prefixes and suffixes. The people in the child's environment use intact language. We may also note that this growing child, this new languager,

receives reinforcement for partial success in producing the language, a fact which stimulates increasingly successful approximations of language.

Looking at just these three descriptions of the process of acquiring the spoken language, let us relate these to the acquisition of reading skills, and to the previous description of the teacher who can be most effective in this acquisition.

First -- reception precedes expression. Many of our students do not become efficient or enthusiastic readers because the burden of the reading act is placed upon them much too soon. This practice is detrimental to the child's natural urge to grow. Reading actually becomes a burdensome task for the child. How can we make reading easier? We can begin by using the receptive approach to reading instruction. The use of the receptive approach relieves much of the frustration in learning how to read--frustration encountered by both teacher and student. The receptive approach acknowledges the student as a receiver of language - not yet expected to read the language, but being prepared for the reading act. This can be done in several ways.

One way in which to begin, that can be used even with very young children, is the oral cloze procedure. The teacher reads to the child, stopping at strategic places to let the

child supply the missing word. Any word that makes sense is accepted, even though it may not be the one in the story. Let the child give several words that would make sense in that particular place. Then tell the child which of the words is in the story, and continue reading. The child will begin to understand that reading must make sense, developing skills of prediction, and having predictions confirmed by the teacher. Beginning sounds and letters may later be used as clues to the missing word.

For a subsequent lesson, the teacher can have the students follow the written material while the teacher reads. The teacher can project the story and have the students follow with their eyes as the reading progresses. The teacher will invite the students to help in the reading. During this process the students will be learning about left to right and top to bottom directionality for reading, and also relating the spoken word to the written word. The teacher can then check on these dimensions of the reading act by saying, "When I stop reading, I will ask someone to come up and point to the last word I said." The story can also be put on tape for the children to listen to while looking at the reading selection.

These receptive procedures just described have also incorporated the second description of the acquisition of

spoken language -- that is, being immersed in the whole of language. The activities described above present language intact, not as a fractured bit-and-piece process.

The teacher can now begin to use a selective cloze procedure with the selection. By this time, several students will have begun to help with the reading. Such help will be encouraged, but the teacher will still assume the burden of the reading unless there is a specific request from a student who wants to demonstrate a developing feeling of power over the written word. At first the teacher will black out the last words in sentences, so that the student will have a maximum amount of information on which to base a prediction. When the prediction has been made, the teacher will reveal the first letter or letter blend in the word so that the student may decide if the given word would be confirmed by the exposed letter or letters. As the students are becoming immersed in the story, many other variations of the cloze procedure may be used: deletion of parts of speech, phonic or structural element deletion, deletion of verb endings or affixes, deletion of connectives. Notice how these learning experiences are taking place in a setting of the wholeness of the language.

The student will soon be able to read the whole story. If a miscue is made, the response of the teacher will reflect the third description of the acquisition of the spoken language, in which the developing languager was rewarded for approximations of the word. Traditionally in our reading groups, without being aware of the implications, and with well-intentioned motives, the teacher of reading has expected perfection. The teacher has expected THE WORD in its perfect wholeness. Most teachers of reading have been caught up in the NO ERROR syndrome. In testing out hypotheses, though, error is bound to occur at some point. The teacher of reading must be prepared to comment on any part of a response that is correct, and to search for the logic in the child's error. First emphasis will continue to be on "what makes sense", until this becomes the student's automatic unspoken question when reading.

Using just these ideas as a nucleus, we can begin to create a setting for developmental reading instruction in which success can become a reality for students who otherwise might never have experienced the triumph of conquering the written word. This approach to the teaching of reading is so powerful that it is effective not only with beginning readers, but also with readers at later grade levels who have heretofore been considered to be problem readers. With this approach,

there does not have to be a gradual working up from below grade-level reading to grade-level reading; the reading instruction, for most students, can begin at grade level, accompanied by appropriate activities to develop phonic and structural analysis skills, vocabulary, language processing skills and levels of comprehension.

Using this approach, the proliferation of problem readers can be prevented.

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